

# on the poverty of student life



Distributed by  
Firestarter Press  
Po Box 50217  
Baltimore, MD  
21211

# on the poverty of student life

*considered in its economic  
political, psychological, sexual,  
and particularly intellectual aspects  
with a modest proposal for its remedy*

by  
members of the Situationist International  
and some students at the University of  
Strassbourg

Black & Red  
Detroit  
2000

First published in 1966 at the University of Strasbourg by students of the University and members of the Internationale Situationiste.

A few students elected to the student union printed 10,000 copies with university funds. The copies were distributed at the official ceremony marking the beginning of the academic year. The student union was promptly closed by court order.

Black & Red published a different translation of this text in 1973 and 1983. In 1999 Ken Knabb posted his own translation on the internet. The version published here was done by Lorraine Perlman. It follows the Champ Libre edition published in Paris in 1976.

Ralph Franklin designed the cover.

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<sup>14</sup> In which participants in the anti-bomb movement discovered, made public and then invaded several ultra-secret fallout shelters reserved for members of the government.

<sup>15</sup> One thinks here of the excellent journal *Heatwave*, which seems to be evolving toward an increasingly rigorous radicality.

<sup>16</sup> Attempts to industrialize these countries have been through classic primitive accumulation at the expense of the peasantry, accelerated by bureaucratic terror.

<sup>17</sup> For 45 years the French "Communist" Party has not taken a single step toward seizing power. The same is true in all the advanced countries that have not fallen under the heel of the "Red" Army.

<sup>18</sup> "Class Struggles in Algeria" (*IS*, #10).

<sup>19</sup> On their role in Algeria, see "Class Struggles in Algeria" (*IS*, #10).

<sup>20</sup> "Address to Revolutionaries of Algeria and of All Countries," (*IS*, #10).

<sup>21</sup> According to Rosa Luxemburg's theoretical critique of it.

<sup>22</sup> In contrast, a group like ICO [Informations Correspondance Ouvrières], by shunning any organization or coherent theory, condemns itself to nonexistence.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marc Kravetz, a slick orator well known among the UNEF politicians, made the mistake of venturing into "theoretical research": in 1964 he published a defense of student unionism in *Les Temps Modernes*, which he then denounced in the same periodical a year later.

<sup>2</sup> It goes without saying that we use the concepts of *spectacle*, *role*, etc. in the situationist sense.

<sup>3</sup> If they ever stop shitting in his face, it's only to come around behind to bugger him.

<sup>4</sup> But without the revolutionary consciousness of the skilled worker who had no illusions about being promoted.

<sup>5</sup> We are referring to the culture of Hegel or the Encyclopédistes, not to that of the Sorbonne or the École Normale Supérieure.

<sup>6</sup> Because they don't dare to speak in the name of philistine liberalism, they make up references in the charters granted to universities in the Middle Ages, that epoch of "the democracy of nonfreedom."

<sup>7</sup> See "Correspondence with a Cybernetician" in *Internationale Situationniste* #9 and the situationist tract *La tortue dans la vitrine* directed against the neoprofessor A. Moles.

<sup>8</sup> See *The Sexual Struggle of Youth* and *The Function of the Orgasm*.

<sup>9</sup> To get the rest of the population to appear before a psychiatrist in his fortress asylum, a straitjacket is needed. But once students learn that modern control centers have been set up in their ghettos, they rush there in such numbers that they have to wait in line to enter.

<sup>10</sup> On the *Arguments* gang and the disappearance of its journal, see the tract, "Into the Trashcan of History" issued by the Situationist International in 1963.

<sup>11</sup> In this regard, one cannot recommend too highly the solution already practiced by the most intelligent: steal them.

<sup>12</sup> Recent dissension within the "Union of Communist Students" and within parallel Christian groups demonstrates that all these students agree on one fundamental principle: unconditional submission to hierarchical superiors.

<sup>13</sup> Young people not only sense it, but attempt to express it.

### 1. To make shame more shameful still by making it public.

It's pretty safe to say that the student is the most universally despised creature in France, apart from the policeman and the priest. But the reasons given for despising him are often wrong and reflect the dominant ideology, whereas the reasons for which he is truly despicable from a revolutionary perspective remain hidden and unrecognized. Practitioners of false opposition are well aware of distortions like this—distortions which they themselves propagate—and they invert what's truly contemptible into a self-serving admiration. The impotent leftist intellectuals (from *Les Temps Modernes* to *L'Express*) grovel before the supposed "upsurge of students" while bureaucratic organizations in decline (from the "Communist" Party to the UNEF [French National Student Union]) jealously vie for the student's "moral and material support." We will show the reasons for this interest in the student and how they coincide with the dominant reality of overdeveloped capitalism. We are going to use this pamphlet to denounce them one by one: the path to reversal of alienation is the same as the one that leads to alienation.

Until now, all the analyses and studies of student life have ignored the essential. None of them goes beyond the horizons of the academic specializations (psychology, soci-



ology, economics) and so they remain fundamentally erroneous. All of them are guilty of what Fourier called a "systematic confusion" when fundamental questions are treated without considering any overall conception of modern society. A fetishism for facts masks the essential category, and details cause the *totality* to be forgotten. Everything is told about this society except what it really is: a society dominated by *commodities* and *spectacles*. In their study *Les Hérités: les étudiants et la culture*, the sociologists Bourderon and Passedieu are baffled by the handful of partial truths they have managed to turn up. And despite their good intentions they fall back on professorial morality, the inevitable Kantian ethic of *true democratization achieved by truly rationalizing the educational system* (namely, by educating the system). Meanwhile their disciples, such as Kravetz<sup>1</sup>, believing there are thousands experiencing a reawakening, compensate for their petty-bureaucratic bitterness with a pastiche of outdated revolutionary phraseology.

In modern capitalism, reification becomes a spectacle<sup>2</sup> where everyone is assigned a specific role within the collective passivity. The student is no exception to this rule. His is a temporary role, a rehearsal for his proper role when he will serve actively to preserve the commodity system. Being a student is just an initiation.

Magically, this transition takes on all the characteristics of a mythical initiation. It is totally cut off from historical reality, both of the individual and of society. The student is suspended between a present condition and a clearly delineated future; the passage from one to the other is completely predictable and automatic. A schizophrenic consciousness enables him to withdraw into the company of his fellow initiates, remain ignorant about his future and revel in a mystical unity provided by a present that's protected from history. The impulse to invert official (namely economic) truth is quite understandable: student life is pretty hard to face. In our "affluent society" the student is a pauper. More than 80% of students come from income groups above the working class, yet 90% of them have less money than the lowest-paid worker. Student poverty exceeds even the poverty of the society of the spectacle; it is more extreme than

policing techniques, they have no use for it. They do nothing but accumulate *capital*, and thereby *proletarians*. A proletarian is someone who has no control over how his life is lived and who knows it. The new proletariat has the historic opportunity to be the sole inheritor of consequence to the *bourgeois world's* valueless riches that it must transform and go *beyond* so as to foster the development of fully realized human beings pursuing the total appropriation of nature and of their own nature. Such a realization of a human being's *nature* can only mean the limitless multiplication and boundless satisfaction of the *real desires* which the *spectacle* represses into distant corners of the revolutionary subconscious, and which it offers only as phantoms in the dreamlike delirium of its advertising. Accordingly, true gratification of genuine desires—which requires discarding all the pseudo-needs and pseudo-desires that the system manufactures every day in order to perpetuate its own power—cannot take place without eliminating the commodity spectacle and going beyond it.

Modern history can be liberated and its countless achievements given free scope only by the forces that it represses: by the workers who have no control over the conditions, meaning and products of their own activities. In the nineteenth century the proletariat was already the heir of philosophy; now it has become the heir of modern art and of the first conscious critique of everyday life. In suppressing itself, art and philosophy will necessarily be realized. For the proletariat, to transform the world and to change life are one and the same thing, inseparable aspirations that coincide with the suppression of itself as a class, the dissolution of the present reign of necessity, and the finally possible accession to the reign of freedom. The radical critique and unrestricted reconstruction of all the values and patterns of behavior imposed by an alienated reality comprise its maximum program. Unshackled creativity in the construction of all life's moments and events is the only *poetry* it can acknowledge, a poetry made by all, the launching of the revolutionary festival. Proletarian revolutions will be *festivals* or they will be nothing, for celebration is the keynote of the life they herald. *Play* is the fundamental principle of this festival, and the only rules it recognizes are to live without dead time and to enjoy without restraints.

Eliminating commodities implies abolishing *work* and replacing it with a new type of free activity, thereby ending one of modern society's fundamental splits, the one between increasingly reified labor and passively consumed leisure activity. Groups in the process of decomposition like *Socialisme ou Barbarie* or *Pouvoir Ouvrier*,<sup>22</sup> although supporting the modern principle of Workers' Power, continue to follow the path of the old workers movement on the central matter of trying to reform and "humanize" work. Today, work itself must be attacked. Far from being "utopian," the abolition of work is the primary requirement for effectively superseding commodity society, for eliminating in each person's daily life the separation between "free time" and "work time"—those reciprocal sectors of an alienated life—that is the perpetual expression of the commodity's intrinsic contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. Only when this opposition is overcome will people be able to create out of their human activity something that results from desire and consciousness and to see themselves reflected in a world that they themselves have created. The democracy of workers councils provides the solution to all the separations of today. It makes "impossible everything that exists outside of individuals."

The conscious control of history by the people who make it—this is the complete revolutionary project. Modern history, like all past history, is the product of social praxis, the result—unconscious—of all human activities. In this era of totalitarian control, capitalism has produced its new religion: the *spectacle*. The *spectacle* is the terrestrial realization of *ideology*. Never has the world been so turned on its head. "As was the 'critique of religion' in Marx's day, today the critique of the spectacle is the essential element of any critique" (*IS* #9).

Humanity must now confront in a historical context the question of *revolution*. The increasingly vast material and technological means are equalled only by everyone's profound and growing dissatisfaction. The bourgeoisie and its Eastern heir, the Bureaucracy, are unable to put this overdevelopment (the basis for the *poetry* of the future) to any use precisely because both strive to *maintain an old order*. Other than for

the new poverty of the new proletariat. In a period when more and more young people are rejecting moral attitudes and family authority so as to submit without delay to undisguised exploitation, the student consistently clings to a "protracted infancy" when he can be docile and free from responsibilities. Belated adolescent crises may provoke occasional conflicts with his family, but he accepts without complaint being treated as a child by the various institutions that govern his daily life.<sup>3</sup>

In the world of the student, every type of social practice is controlled to the utmost. Shifting the entire guilty conscience about society onto students serves to mask everyone's poverty and servitude.

But our contempt for the student is based on quite different grounds. He is contemptible not only for being poor, but also for accepting all sorts of wretchedness, for his unhealthy propensity to wallow in his own alienation, hoping, amid general indifference, to arouse interest in his particular deprivation. The needs of modern capitalism will oblige most students to become mere *low-level functionaries*, performing jobs comparable to those of skilled workers in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The student senses that his approaching future, which will "compensate" him for today's humiliating pauperism, will be miserable so he chooses to focus on the present which he decorates with a false prestige. The compensation itself is too paltry to take seriously. There won't be any glorious tomorrows; only endless, inevitable mediocrity. This is why the student takes comfort in living an imaginary present.

The student is a stoical slave: the tighter authority's chains shackle him, the freer he thinks he is. He sees himself like his new family, the university, sees itself: as the most "independent" of social beings. In fact, he is *directly subjected* to the two most powerful systems of social authority: the family and the State. He is their well-behaved and grateful child and, like all *submissive children*, he shares and internalizes all the values and mystifications of the system. Illusions that formerly had to be inculcated in white-collar workers are now absorbed and passed along by the mass of future minor functionaries.



If poverty in ancient societies produced history's most grandiose systems of compensation (religions), the student, in his impoverished marginality, has only the ruling society's hackneyed images to console him, the absurd repetition of all its alienated concoctions.

In his role as intellectual, the French student is always *out of date*. All the values and enthusiasms that are the pride of his closed little world have long ago been condemned by history as laughable and untenable illusions.

Clinging to the crumbling prestige of the University, the student considers himself lucky to be there. But it's too late. In comparison to the former level of general bourgeois culture<sup>5</sup> his machine-made specialized education is as profoundly debased as the intellectual level at which he begins his studies. This is because the modern economic system requires the mass production of uneducated students who have been rendered incapable of thinking. The University has become an institution for organizing ignorance; "high culture" disappears at the same rate as assembly-lines produce professors; *all* these professors are cretins and most would be jeered in any high school classroom. But the student is oblivious to all of this and continues to listen respectfully to his masters; he consciously suspends all critical judgment so as to wallow in the mystical state of being a "student"—someone seriously committed to learning *serious* things—and hopes thereby to learn the latest truths. This is the menopause of the mind. The future revolutionary society will condemn everything that takes place today in lecture halls and classrooms as nothing but *noise, verbal pollution*. The student is already a very bad joke.

The student doesn't even realize that history is altering his "closed" little world. The famous "crisis of the university," just one minor aspect of modern capitalism's more general crisis, is addressed by a variety of specialists in a deaf-mute dialogic. The crisis shows how difficult it is for this particular sector of production to keep up with the fundamental transformation of the productive apparatus. As the social basis for the liberal bourgeois university disappears, scraps of its old ideology become trite. During the era of free-trade capitalism, when the liberal State permitted the

concessions, into surrender. "Self-management must be both the means and the end of the present struggle. It is not only what is at stake in the struggle, but also its appropriate form. It is itself the material it fashions, as well as its own presupposition" ("Class Struggles in Algeria," *IS* #10).

A unitary critique of the world is the guarantee of the coherence and truth of a revolutionary organization. To tolerate the existence of an oppressive system in a particular region (because it proclaims "revolutionary" slogans, for example) amounts to recognizing the legitimacy of oppression. Similarly, to tolerate alienation in any one domain of social life means acquiescing in the inevitability of all forms of reification. It is not enough to be for the power of workers councils in the abstract; it is necessary to demonstrate what it means concretely: the elimination of commodity production and therefore of the proletariat. In all existing societies, rationality is rooted in *commodity logic*; and it is here that the principles for carrying out autocratic regulation originate. (Modern societies are like puzzles whose pieces appear to be different but turn out to be identical.) Commodity reification is the *pivotal* obstacle to total emancipation, to the creation of a free life. In the world of commodity production, praxis is not undertaken according to autonomously determined aims, but according to directives from an external authority. Economic laws may seem more and more to be laws of nature of a particular type, but their potency rests *only* on a "the participants' lack of consciousness."

The essence of commodity production is the loss of oneself in the chaotic and unthinking creation of a world that is completely beyond the control of its creators. In contrast, the profoundly revolutionary core of generalized self-management is that everyone will consciously control the whole of life. To self-manage commodity alienation would only let everyone program his own survival—an attempt to square the capitalist circle. The task of the workers councils will therefore not be to self-manage the existing world, but to transform it qualitatively and continuously: to rid it of the commodity (responsible for that enormous detour in the history of human self-creation).

The separation of theory and practice was the reef on which the old revolutionary movement foundered. Only the most exceptional periods of proletarian struggles overcame this split and discovered their own *truth*. No organization has yet bridged this gap. *Ideology*, no matter how "revolutionary" it may be, always serves the rulers; it is an *alarm signal* revealing the presence of the enemy fifth column. This is why a critique of ideology must, in the final analysis, be the central concern of a revolutionary organization. Lies are a product of the alienated world; when they appear within an organization claiming to bear *social truth*, that organization becomes just one more lie in a world of lies.

A revolutionary organization that envisions absolute power in the hands of Workers Councils must provide a setting where all the positive aspects of this power can begin to take shape. Such an organization has to wage a mortal struggle against the Leninist theory of organization. The 1905 revolution and the Russian workers' spontaneous self-organization into soviets provided an active critique of that pernicious theory.<sup>21</sup> But the Bolshevik movement persisted in believing that working-class spontaneity could not go beyond "trade-union consciousness" and it was thus incapable of grasping "the totality." This amounted to decapitating the proletariat so the Party could put itself at the "head" of the revolution. Denying the proletariat's historical capacity to liberate itself, as Lenin did so implacably, means denying its capacity to totally run the future society. In this Leninist perspective, the slogan "All power to the soviets" meant nothing more than the conquest of the soviets by the Party and the building of the party State rather than the armed proletariat's withering-away "State."

"All power to the soviets" must once again be our slogan, but this time free of Bolshevik ulterior motives and aims. The proletariat cannot take part in the *game* of revolution unless the stakes are the *whole world*; if not, there is no point to it. The sole form of its power, *generalized self-management*, cannot be shared with any other authority. Because this means the complete dissolution of all powers, it can tolerate no limitation (geographical or otherwise); any compromises it accepts are immediately transformed into

university some marginal freedom, the latter could consider itself an independent authority. But the freedom was strictly limited to what that type of society required: providing a privileged minority with an adequate general education before they rejoined the ranks of the ruling class. The absurdity of so many bitter and nostalgic professors<sup>6</sup> stems from the fact that they have lost their former position as guard-dogs of future masters and now have a considerably less noble function as sheep-dogs who, in accordance with the planned needs of the economic system, herd flocks of "white-collar" workers to their respective factories and offices. These professors offer their archaisms as an alternative to the technocratization of the university and placidly continue to purvey scraps of "the liberal arts" to audiences of future specialists who will not know how to utilize them.

More serious, and thus more dangerous, are the Leftist modernizers and the UNEF, led by FGEL [Federation of Liberal Arts Groups] "radicals," who demand a "reform of the university structure" so as to "reintegrate the university into social and economic life," i.e., to adapt it to the needs of modern capitalism. The various universities and institutes that once dispensed the "liberal arts" to the ruling class still retain some anachronistic prestige, but are being transformed into fast-track factories for training low- and mid-level functionaries. Far from protesting against the historical process that subordinates one of the last relatively autonomous sectors of social life to the demands of the commodity system, the progressive modernizers complain about the delays and inefficiencies in implementing it. These are the partisans of the future cybernetized university which, here and there, is already showing its ugly head.<sup>7</sup> The commodity system and its modern servants—these are the enemy.

But any discussion of these matters goes on far above the student's head, somewhere in the celestial realm of his masters; and he's oblivious to all of it. He has no control over his own life; thus *life itself* eludes him.

Due to his extreme economic poverty, the student is condemned to a grim level of *survival*. Complacent nevertheless, he refashions his very ordinary indigence into an original "lifestyle" and becomes a shabby bohemian. Now



"bohemianism" is not an original solution, nor can it be lived without a complete and definitive break with the university milieu. Thus student bohemians (and every student fancies himself to be a bit of one) cling to a phoney and degraded version of what, in the best of cases, is just a mediocre individual solution. Everyone scorns them, even elderly provincial ladies. Now, thirty years after that excellent educator of youth,<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Reich, these "nonconformists" still retain the most conventional amorous-erotic practices, and reproduce the traditional relations of class society in their sexual relationships. The student's disposition to become a militant for any cause whatever speaks volumes about his impotence. Even though the totalitarian spectacle accords him some minimal individual freedoms, and although relatively few demands are made on his time, the student remains ignorant of adventure, and prefers the restrictive routine of space-time that the spectacle's guardians have set up for him to follow.

Though not required to separate work and leisure, he chooses to do so, while hypocritically proclaiming his contempt for "good students" and "study fiends." He accepts every type of separation and then goes to his student, religious, sports or political club to complain about the lack of communication. He is so stupid and unhappy that he voluntarily goes in for check-ups—individually and in groups—by policing psychiatrists and psychologists provided by the University Psychological Health Centers, vanguard agencies of modern oppression which are naturally hailed as a great victory for student unionism.<sup>9</sup>

The student's immediate compensation for the poverty of his everyday life comes in a fantastic form: the opium of cultural commodities. The student finds it natural to take his place as a respectful disciple within the cultural spectacle. Although the point of production may be nearby, access to the actual Sanctuary of Culture is denied him; so it is as admiring spectator that he discovers "modern culture." In an era when *art is dead* he remains the most loyal patron of film clubs and theaters and the most avid consumer of its preserved corpse, packaged in cellophane and displayed in the cultural supermarkets. Consuming guilelessly, unreserv-

The ruling social system, which prides itself on its constant self-modernization, is going to meet its match in the modernized negation that it itself produces.<sup>20</sup> So now let the dead bury and mourn their dead. Demystifying the historical movement gets rid of the phantoms that haunted revolutionary consciousness; the revolution of everyday life now faces the enormous tasks ahead. It's time to reinvent both revolution and the life it envisions. If the revolutionary project remains fundamentally the same—to abolish class society—this is because the social conditions that give rise to such a project have not been radically transformed anywhere. The project must be undertaken with a radicality and coherence that benefits from the experience of previous revolutionaries' failures, so that a partial realization will not bring about a new division of society.

Since the struggle between the system and the new proletariat can only be in terms of the *totality*, the future revolutionary movement must reject anything that might reproduce any of the alienating effects associated with the *commodity system*—the system defined by labor being a commodity. The movement must itself be an organic critique of the system as well as a negation that incorporates all elements for a possible *supersession*. As Lukács correctly observed, revolutionary organization is the necessary mediation between theory and practice, between man and history, between the mass of workers and the proletariat *constituted as class*. (Lukács' mistake was to believe that the Bolshevik Party fulfilled this role.) If they are to further the revolutionary project, "theoretical" tendencies and differences must be translated immediately into organizational questions. Ultimately everything depends on how the new revolutionary movement resolves the question of organization; on whether its organizational forms are consistent with its basic project: *the international realization of the absolute power of Workers Councils* as anticipated in this century's proletarian revolutions. Such an organization must provide an all-encompassing critique of everything that characterizes the society it is fighting: commodity production, *ideology* in all its guises, the State and the separations imposed by the State.

is clear that the revolutionary movement can be reborn only when Stalinism is eradicated. Prehistory's *final* revolution must take as its immutable dictum: *Stalinism must be destroyed*.

This revolution must break once and for all with its own prehistory and look to the future for all its poetry. "Bolshevik revivalists" who act out the farcical role of "militant" in various leftist *groupuscules* emit odors from the past and in no way herald the future. These remnants from the great shipwreck of the "revolution betrayed" present themselves as loyal adherents to Bolshevik orthodoxy. Their loyal defense of the USSR is inflexible; and this is what constitutes their scandalous betrayal of revolution.

Only in the underdeveloped countries do they manage to retain their illusions, and here they sanction a theoretical underdevelopment.<sup>9</sup> From *Partisans* (the organ of now-reconciled Stalino-Trotskyist currents) through the spectrum of tendencies and semi-tendencies that, inside and outside the *Fourth International*, squabble over "Trotsky," one encounters the same revolutionary *ideology* along with the same theoretical and practical inability to grasp the problems of the modern world. Forty years of counterrevolution separate them from the Revolution. They are wrong because this is no longer 1920, and in 1920 they were already wrong. The dissolution of the "ultra-leftist" *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group after it split into two factions—"Cardanist-modernist" and "traditional Marxist" (*Pouvoir Ouvrier*)—is proof, if any were needed, that there can be no revolution outside the modern, nor any modern thought outside a reinvention of the revolutionary critique (*IS* #9). Separating these two approaches inevitably means falling back either into the museum of revolutionary prehistory or into the system's modernism, (i.e., the ruling counterrevolution): into *Voix Ouvrière* or *Arguments*.

As for the various anarchist groups, they are all prisoners of the anarchist label and their only possession is an ideology restricted to the word "Anarchy." The pitiful *Le Monde Libertaire*, obviously edited by *students*, attains the most incredible level of confusion and stupidity. Since they tolerate each other, they would *tolerate anything*.

edly and uncritically, he is in his element. If the "cultural centers" hadn't already existed, the student would have invented them. He fits perfectly all the sociological clichés of American marketing research: he's a conspicuous consumer, conditioned by advertising to be a fervent partisan of one worthless product that is identical to another worthless one, preferring Brand X (Pérec or Godard, for example) while detesting Brand Y (Robbe-Grillet or Lelouch, perhaps).

When the "deities" who produce and organize his cultural spectacle appear on a stage in human form, he is their main audience, their perfect fan. Their most repulsive exhibitions attract students in droves. When the priests of various isms present their rambling dialogues (seminars on "Marxist" thought; conferences of Catholic intellectuals) or when the debris of the literary world comes together to bear witness to their impotence (five thousand students attended a forum on "What are the possibilities of literature?"), who but students fill the halls?

Incapable of real passions, the student savors the passionless polemics between the celebrities of Unintelligence: Althusser -- Garaudy -- Sartre -- Barthes -- Picard -- Lefebvre -- Lévi-Strauss -- Halliday -- Châtelet -- Antoine; as well as the debates over rival ideologies that serve to mask real problems by discussing false ones: Humanism -- Existentialism -- Structuralism -- Scientism -- New Criticism -- Dialectico-naturalism -- Cyberneticism -- *Planète*-ism -- Metaphilosophism.

Conscientious, he thinks he is avant-garde if he has seen the latest Godard, bought the latest *Arguments* book,<sup>10</sup> or participated in the latest happening organized by the asshole Lapassade. In his ignorance he finds "revolutionary" (as guaranteed on the label) the drabest re-write of old discourses, undoubtedly relevant in an earlier era and now spruced up for the market. This is essential for preserving his cultural status. The student takes pride in purchasing, as everyone else is doing, important and difficult texts that "mass culture" is disseminating at an accelerating pace.<sup>11</sup> But since he doesn't know how to read, he is satisfied just to contemplate them.

His favorite reading matter are publications that pro-



mote a feverish consumption of cultural novelties; he willingly adopts their commercialized pronouncements as guidelines for his own tastes. He is enchanted by *L'Express* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*; as for *Le Monde*, he considers it a reliable and truly "objective" newspaper, even if its style is a bit too difficult for him. To deepen his general knowledge he turns to *Planète*, the bewitching magazine that removes wrinkles and blackheads from old ideas. With guides like this he feels prepared to participate in the modern world and delve into politics.

In France, more than anywhere else, the student is willing to be *politicized*. But he is unaware that the same *spectacle* defines his political participation. Thus he can accept the pitiful and tattered remnants of a Left that "socialist" reformism and Stalinist counterrevolution annihilated *more than forty years ago*. The rulers are well aware that the Left has been defeated; the workers are too, though more confusedly. But the student remains oblivious to this fact and, with a dull pride, he continues to participate in the most absurd protests that never attract anybody but students. This false consciousness about politics makes the student community a happy hunting ground for shadowy manipulators of dying bureaucratic organizations (like the "Communist" Party and the UNEF). These organizations channel the student's political options in a totalitarian fashion. Should any urge toward "independence" arise, a parody of resistance can quickly tame it, after which harmonious order, never seriously questioned, is reestablished.<sup>12</sup> When someone really wants to stick his neck out, like a person in the group that calls itself "Revolutionary Communist Youth" (a deluded example of false advertising, as they are neither revolutionary, nor communist nor young), he cheerfully propagates the slogan handed down from above: *Peace in Vietnam*.

The student takes pride in opposing the "archaic" aspects of the de Gaulle regime, but his criticisms imply approval of *crimes from an earlier era* (such as Stalinism in the days of Togliatti, Garaudy, Khrushchev and Mao). Thus, his *youthful* perspective is even more *archaic* than the regime's—the Gaullists at least are competent enough to administer a modern society.

When opposition to this world, even by supposedly revolutionary organizations, remains on the enemy's terrain, the opposition is highly deceptive and only apparent. These organizations propagate more or less rigid *ideologies*, and their efforts ultimately help to consolidate the dominant order. The labor unions and political parties that were forged by the working class to further its own emancipation have become control mechanisms for the system, the private property of leaders seeking their personal emancipation who use them as stepping stones to positions in the ruling class of a society they wouldn't dream of questioning. Party programs and union statutes may still contain bland "revolutionary" phrases, but what the organizations advocate and practice is watered-down *reformism*, even as capitalism officially claims to be reformist. In places where these parties have been able to seize power—in countries more backward than Russia—they have only reproduced the Stalinist model of counter-revolutionary totalitarianism.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, they serve as a static and necessary complement to bureaucratized capitalism (fully capable of regulating itself without outside help), the indispensable contradiction for maintaining capitalism's police-humanism.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, vis-à-vis the working masses, these parties remain trusty and unwavering defenders of the bureaucratic counterrevolution, the obedient agents of its foreign policy. In a world characterized by lies they propagate the fundamental lie and their efforts go to perpetuate the universal dictatorship of the Economy and the State. As the situationists put it, "For a global ruling system moving toward totalitarian self-regulation, false forms of opposition that remain a permanent part of the system challenge it in appearance only, and such opposition actually serves to reinforce it. Bureaucratic pseudo-socialism is only the most grandiose of the disguises that conceal the old world of hierarchy and alienated labor."<sup>18</sup> As for student unionism, it is nothing but the caricature of a caricature, a pointless and ludicrous imitation of labor unionism gone bad.

The theoretical and practical denunciation of all forms of Stalinism must be the plainly enunciated core of all future revolutionary organizations. In France, for example, where economic backwardness is delaying awareness of the crisis, it



nascent Proletariat demonstrated its historical ability to *freely* organize all aspects of social life. Whereas its first great "victory," the Bolshevik revolution, turned out to be an unmistakable defeat with the most disastrous consequences. The triumph of the Bolshevik order coincided with the international counterrevolutionary movement that began when the Spartakists were crushed by German "Social Democracy." These concurrent victories were more significant than the two triumphant parties' apparent antagonism, for the Bolshevik social order clearly turned out to be the old order in a new disguise, one more version of it. Internally, the Russian counterrevolution established and developed a new mode of exploitation, *bureaucratic State-capitalism*; externally, it fostered the growth of a "Communist" International whose branches served to defend and reproduce their Russian model. In its bureaucratic and bourgeois variants, capitalism won a new lease on life, over the dead bodies of Kronstadt sailors, Ukrainian peasants and the workers of Berlin, Kiel, Turin, Shanghai, and finally Barcelona.

The Third International, ostensibly created by the Bolsheviks to counteract the remnants of the Second International's social-democratic reformism and to unite the vanguard of the proletariat in "revolutionary communist parties," was too closely linked to the interests of its founders to bring about, anywhere or at any time, a *genuine socialist revolution*. In reality, the Third International was essentially a continuation of the Second. The Russian model was quickly imposed on the Western workers' organizations and they evolved as a single entity. The totalitarian dictatorship of the Bureaucracy (the new ruling class) over the Russian proletariat was paralleled in other countries by the great mass of workers being subjected to a stratum of political and labor-union bureaucrats whose interests were clearly in conflict with their own. The Stalinist monster haunted working-class consciousness, while Capitalism, becoming bureaucratized and overdeveloped, resolved its internal crises, proudly proclaimed its new triumph and claimed it was permanent. In spite of apparent variations and oppositions, a single social form dominates the world; *old world* principles continue to govern our *modern world*. The dead still haunt the minds of the living.

But this is not the student's only archaic trait. He feels obliged to have general opinions about everything, to have a coherent world-view that gives meaning to his need for activism and asexual promiscuity. As a result, he falls prey to the most recent fervid activities of the churches, hurries off to worship the ultimate in archaisms, the putrescent carcass of God, and to subscribe to the decomposing remains of prehistoric religions in the belief that they are appropriate for him and his time. It is worthy of note that students along with elderly provincial ladies form the social sectors with the highest percentage of religious adherents—this is still "missionary country." Elsewhere the clerics have been trounced or driven out, but here student-priests continue openly to bugger thousands of students in their spiritual shithouses.

In all fairness, we must grant that there are *some* tolerably intelligent students who have little trouble getting around the petty restrictions designed to confine the mediocre students. They succeed in doing this because they *understand the system*, and because they despise it and know themselves to be its enemies. They get from the educational system the best it has to offer: namely, grants. Currently, flaws in the system's logic require it to retain a small, purely intellectual, sector: research; and certain students quietly take advantage of this flaw to introduce trouble at the highest echelons. The blatant disdain they have for the system is one part of their clear-headedness which allows them to outdo the system's toadies, especially intellectually. They can already be counted among the theonists of the coming revolutionary movement and they take pride in being as notorious as it is, once the movement starts to be noticed. They make no secret of the fact that what they extract so easily from the "academic system" is used to destroy it—because if a student rebels against anything, he must rebel against his *studies*—even though the need to rebel comes less naturally to him than to the worker, who rebels spontaneously against his condition as worker. But the student is a product of modern society as much as Godard and Coca-Cola are. To struggle against his extreme alienation requires a struggle against society as a whole. It is impossible to make such a critique on

the basis of being a student: whoever defines himself as a student thereby lays claim to a pseudo-value that keeps him from comprehending how he's been dispossessed and keeps him immersed in false consciousness. Wherever any challenge to modern society is found, young rebels are central; and their rebellion serves as the clearest and most comprehensive critique of student behavior.

### 3. To create at last a situation that goes beyond the point of no return.

"To be avant-garde means to move in step with reality" (JS #8). The radical critique of the modern world must now have the *totality* as its object and as its objective. Unremittingly, the critique must disclose the modern world's actual past, its present reality and the prospects for transforming it. It is impossible to comprehend the whole truth of the contemporary world, much less to formulate the project for its total subversion, without *revealing its hidden history*, without examining in a totally open and critical manner the entire history of the international revolutionary movement—its "defeats" as well as its "victories" that was initiated by the Western proletariat over a century ago. "This movement that struggled against the old world's entire edifice came to an end long ago" (JS #7). *It failed*. Its final historical manifestation was the defeat of the proletarian revolution in Spain (in Barcelona, in May 1937). But official "defeats" as well as official "victories" have to be judged in light of their subsequent histories and their re-examined truths. In this regard we can agree with Karl Liebknecht's remark, on the eve of his assassination, that "some defeats are really victories, while some victories are more shameful than any defeat." Thus the first great "defeat" of proletarian power, the Paris Commune, was in reality its first great *victory*, since for the first time the

are the two major groups in the *Revolutionary Communist League*, a coalition that shares a common orientation. This association is already tackling the problem of revolutionary organization. Without illusions, it simultaneously combats both Western capitalism and the bureaucracy of the so-called socialist countries. It already brings together several thousand students and workers organized on democratic and anti-hierarchical principles, with all members participating in all the activities of the organization. These Japanese revolutionaries are the first in the world to be carrying on major organized struggles in the name of an advanced revolutionary program and with substantial mass participation. In demonstration after demonstration thousands of workers and students pour into the streets in violent confrontation with the Japanese police. However, the RCL is still lacks a complete and concrete analysis of the two systems it battles with such ferocity. It has yet to define the precise nature of bureaucratic exploitation, just as it still needs to formulate explicitly the characteristics of modern capitalism, make a critique of everyday life and a critique of the spectacle. The Revolutionary Communist League remains fundamentally a classic proletarian organization. At this time it is the leading revolutionary group in the world and henceforth it should serve as a focus for discussing and unifying the new global revolutionary proletarian critique. □

□ The SI's judgment of the Revolutionary Communist League turned out to be mistaken in some respects. The RCL Zengakuren was not "the" Zengakuren but only one of several rival ones (another was dominated by the Japanese Communist Party, others by various combinations of Trotskyists, Maoists, etc.). In the early sixties the Zengakuren faction that was to form the RCL did indeed have many of the positive features the SI attributed to it: it had a political platform distinctly to the left of Trotskyism, participated militantly in political struggles on many fronts, and seems to have had a fairly experimental approach to organizational and tactical questions. In 1963 it sent some delegates to Europe who met the situationists, and it later translated a few situationist texts into Japanese. At least by 1970, however, when an SI delegate visited Japan, the RCL had devolved into a largely Leninist position and turned out to be not very different from leftist sects everywhere else. [note furnished by Ken Knabb]

## 2. It is not enough for theory to seek its realization in practice; practice must seek theory.

After a long period of slumber and permanent counterrevolution, the last few years have seen the emergence of a new period of contestation, animated largely by young people. When the society of the spectacle depicts itself and its enemies, it imposes its own ideological categories to interpret the world and history. It presents everything that happens as part of a natural order, while downplaying genuine new developments that herald its *supersession* as no more than novel chimeras. In reality, the youth rebellion against a way of life imposed on them is a mere preview to a much more widespread subversion that will embrace everyone who feels how more and more impossible it is to *live* in this society; it is a prelude to the next revolutionary era. Using familiar techniques for inverting reality, the dominant ideology and its daily mouthpieces manage to reduce this authentic historical movement to a socio-natural pseudocategory: the Idea of Youth (whose presumed nature is to rebel). Thus, every new youth rebellion is explained as a recurring youth phenomenon renewed each generation, one which fades "when young people become engaged in the serious business of production which provides them with valid, tangible results." The "youth revolt" has been and continues to be a focus for an outpouring of bombastic



journalism which transforms a potential revolt into a spectacle for contemplation while thwarting the real one. This perversion is an integral part of the spectacle and it is needed to assure the smooth functioning of the system. A youth revolt against society thus serves to reassure society because it remains a partial revolt that is relegated to the *apartheid* fringe of adolescent "problems" (just as there will be racial problems, and women's problems), and which will be outgrown. The truth is that if modern society has a "youth" problem it is because young people are most sensitive to this society's severe crisis.<sup>13</sup> As prototypical products of modern society, the youth of today are modern, choosing either to integrate themselves completely, or to reject society totally. More surprising than the rebelliousness of youth is how resigned "adults" are. The reason for this is not biological, but historical: the previous generation experienced all the defeats and swallowed all the lies of the shameful break-up of the revolutionary movement.

In itself, "Youth" is an advertising hype linked to the capitalist mode of production and used to express its vitality. This deceptive centrality of youth became possible with the post World War II economic recovery when a whole new category of more tractable consumers entered the market in mass and whose *role* as consumers made them authentic participants in the society of the spectacle. Once again, the official ideological interpretation conflicts with reality (lagging behind it as usual) and it turns out to be the youth who are erupting in an irresistible frenzy for life, in spontaneous revolt against the everyday boredom and dead time that the old world continues to produce in spite of its various modernizations. The most rebellious among them display a pure, nihilistic rejection of this society without any perspective beyond the immediate. But a perspective of supersession is being sought and developed everywhere in the world. Now it needs to acquire the coherence of a theoretical critique and find a way to organize this coherence in practice.

At the most basic level, "delinquents" in all countries make a great display of violence to express their refusal to be integrated into society. But the abstract quality of their refusal gives them no possibility of escaping the contradic-

ing to bring to a conscious level and articulate the principles inherent in the critique that workers in East Berlin, Warsaw and Budapest have already made: the proletarian critique of the power of the bureaucratic class. Their revolt is in the difficult situation of having to point to specific problems and propose solutions to them at the same time. In other places the possibility for struggle exists, but the goal remains unclear. In the Eastern bureaucracies the struggles are straightforward and the goals well defined; the problem is to devise forms that can open the way to their realization.

In England the youth revolt found its first organized expression in the anti-bomb movement. This partial struggle was centered around the vague program of the *Committee of 100* and succeeded in bringing 300,000 demonstrators out into the streets. Its high point came in the spring of 1963 with the "Spies for Peace" scandal.<sup>14</sup> For lack of radical perspectives, it inevitably declined, coopted by the dregs of traditional politics and noble-minded pacifists. But the outmoded way that everyday life has been controlled in England is succumbing to the assault of the modern world; the accelerating decomposition of secular values is engendering a critique with profound revolutionary tendencies which addresses all aspects of the prevailing way of life.<sup>15</sup> British youth must link their struggles to the defiant opposition of the British working class which, with its shop steward movement and wildcat strikes, remains one of the most combative in the world. The two struggles can be victorious only if they share common perspectives. The collapse of the Labour government provides another opportunity for such an alliance. Their collaboration will lead to explosions compared to which the Amsterdam Provo riot will be child's play. This is the only way for a real revolutionary movement to arise—one that will respond to practical needs.

Japan is the only advanced industrialized country where a fusion of student youth and radical workers has already taken place.

*Zengakuren*, the well-known organization of revolutionary students, and the *League of Young Marxist Workers*

while it simultaneously praises the "Cultural Revolution" staged by the most gargantuan bureaucracy of modern times: Mao's China. The conspicuous lack of content causes the semi-libertarian and non-authoritarian organizations to risk falling into the ideology of "group dynamics" or into the closed world of the sect. The widespread consumption of drugs is both an expression of real poverty as well as a protest against this real poverty: it is a deceptive search for freedom in a world without freedom, a religious critique of a world that has left religion behind. It is no accident that drugs are so common in the Beat milieu (that right wing of rebellious youth), where ideological refusal coexists with acceptance of the most outlandish superstitions (Zen, spiritualism, "New Church" mysticism, and other rubbish such as Gandhism and Humanism). In their search for a revolutionary program, American students make the same mistake as the *Provos* and proclaim themselves "society's most exploited class." The first thing for them to realize is that their interests are no different from those of everyone subjected to commodity slavery and common oppression.

In the Eastern Bloc too, bureaucratic totalitarianism is beginning to produce antagonistic forces. There, the youth revolt is particularly intense, but we learn about it only from denunciations in official publications or from measures the police undertake to contain it. From these we learn that numerous young people no longer "respect" the moral and family order (which persists in its most detestable bourgeois form); they engage in "debauchery," despise work and no longer obey the Party's police. The USSR even has a special ministry to combat hooliganism. Alongside this scattered rebellion, a better articulated protest is starting to be heard; clandestine groups and journals emerge and disappear according to fluctuations of police repression. The most significant has been the publication of an *Open Letter to the Polish Communist Party* by two young Poles, *Kuron* and *Modzelewski*, which explicitly affirms the necessity to "abolish current relations of production and social relations" and recognizes that in order to achieve this, "revolution is inevitable." The intelligentsia in the Eastern countries is attempt-

tions of a system which has made them an inevitable by-product. Delinquents are created by every aspect of the current social order: the urbanism of high-rise apartment complexes, the breakdown of values, the spread of increasingly boring consumer leisure, the police-humanist control that encroaches on every aspect of daily life, and the economic survival of a family unit that has lost any meaning. They despise work, *but* they accept commodities. Whatever they see advertised, they want, and they want it now; but they don't have the means to pay for it. This fundamental contradiction dominates their entire existence and it is what thwarts their efforts to make truly free use of their time, to affirm themselves as individuals and to form a sort of community. (When such microcommunities *do* appear at the margin of a developed society, they recreate a primitivism where poverty inevitably recreates hierarchy within the group. This hierarchy, which requires wars with other gangs in order to maintain itself, *isolates* each gang and each individual within the gang.) To escape this contradiction the delinquent must either resign himself to going to work in order to buy commodities—to this end a whole sector of production is devoted specifically to seducing him into consumerism (motorcycles, electric guitars, clothes, records, etc.)—or else he is forced to attack the laws of the commodity, either in a rudimentary way, by stealing it, or in a conscious manner by acquiring a revolutionary critique of the world of the commodity. Consumption cools the behavior of the young rebels and their revolt sinks into gross conformity. For a delinquent, only two futures are possible: the awakening of revolutionary consciousness or blind obedience in the factory.

The *Provos* provide the first example where delinquent tendencies have been transcended, a formation of their first political expression. The group grew out of an encounter between a few career-seeking druggs from the disintegrating art world and a bunch of young rebels trying to do their own thing. Their collaboration enabled both sides to devise and practice a new type of protest. The "artists" contributed a few dubious ideas about play decked out in ideological trappings; the young rebels offered nothing but the violence of their revolt. From the beginning the two groupings re-



remained distinct; the theoryless masses found themselves under the tutelage of a small clique of dubious leaders who tried to maintain their "power" by concocting a "Provoarian" ideology. Instead of the "delinquents" violence moving to a conceptual level where it might influence attempts to supersede art, neoartistic reformism prevailed. The Provos exemplify modern capitalism's most recent reformism: the reform of everyday life. Although nothing short of an uninterrupted revolution can change our lives, the Provo hierarchy—like Bernstein who expected to gradually transform capitalism into socialism by means of reforms—believes that a few improvements can transform everyday life. By opting for the fragmentary, the Provos end up accepting the totality. Hoping to establish a theoretical basis, their leaders have concocted the ridiculous ideology of the "Provoarian" (an artistico-political mish-mash naively thrown together out of mildewed leftovers from a feast they never attended). They contrast this new Provoarian with the supposed passivity and gentrification of the Proletariat (mantra of all this century's cretins). Because they despair of changing the totality, the Provos despair of the only force with any hope of bringing about that change. The Proletariat is the motor of capitalist society, and thus its mortal threat. Political parties, bureaucratic unions, police (who attack workers more often than they do the Provos), the colonization of the totality of life—all this is designed to repress the Proletariat because it is the only threatening force. The Provos have understood none of this, so they are incapable of criticizing the system of production and they remain prisoners of the system as a whole. Thus when an anti-union workers' riot inspired Provo members to practice direct violence, their alarmed leaders were left completely behind and could find nothing better to do than denounce "excesses" and call for nonviolence. These leaders, whose program advocated provoking the authorities so as to reveal their repressiveness, ended up complaining that they had been provoked by the police. And they went so far as to make radio appeals to the young rioters to accept the guidance of the "Provos," i.e., guidance by leaders whose vague "anarchism" has been clearly shown to be nothing more than one more lie. To

arrive at a revolutionary critique, the rebellious Provo rank and file has to begin by rebelling against its own leaders, which means linking up with the objective revolutionary forces of the Proletariat and dumping people like Constant and De Vries. (the first, an official artist of the Kingdom of Holland; the second, a defeated parliamentary candidate who admires the English police). This is the only way for the Provos to join the current authentic protest movement of which they already constitute a rudimentary grouping. If they want to transform the world, they don't need people who are satisfied merely to whiewash it.

By rebelling against their studies, American students have directly challenged a society that requires such studies. And their revolt against the university hierarchy (at Berkeley and elsewhere) has from the start been *a revolt against the entire social system based on hierarchy and dictatorship of both the economy and the State*. By refusing to accept the business and institutional roles for which their specialized studies have trained them, these American students are fundamentally challenging a system of production where the producer has no control over his activity or the product. Despite their groping efforts and considerable confusion, rebelling American youth are starting to seek, within the "affluent society" itself, a coherent revolutionary alternative. They concentrate mainly on two relatively incidental aspects of the American crisis—Blacks and Vietnam—and the small "new Left" organizations clearly reflect this narrow focus. A sincere commitment to democratic principles can be sensed in their organizational form, but the organizations are deficient in subversive content and this causes them to fall into dangerous contradictions. Ignorance about contemporary politics, illustrated by their lack of information, and various illusions about what is going on in the world, cause their hostility to the traditional politics of Old Left organizations to be easily defused and then channelled into unwitting acceptance of them. *Abstract* hostility to their society leads them to admire or support its most conspicuous enemies, namely, the "socialist" bureaucracies of China or Cuba. A group like the "Resurgence Youth Movement" can condemn the State